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S. Korea reverses on dissident Kim, vows not to jail him when he returns

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WASHINGTON — The South Korean government repudiated its own spokesmen yesterday, indicating for the first time that dissident Kim Dae Jung will not be jailed when he returns home next month.

In an unusual statement, the South Korean Embassy specifically disavowed the threats from a senior adviser to President Chun Doo-hwan two days ago. The remarks, an embassy spokesman said, "do not represent the views of the Korean government."

American officials privately expressed relief. They saw the Korean action as a result of quiet pressure from the Reagan administration and as a measure of the importance

President Chun attaches to a prospective visit to Washington in the spring.

Publicly a State Department spokesman said merely that the administration welcomed the statement yesterday. Beyond that, it has several times repeated a hope that Mr. Kim's return to South Korea after two years in U.S. exile would be "trouble free."

Mr. Kim, 59, South Korea's most prominent political dissident, has announced plans to return to Seoul February 8 to resume his campaign for democracy. He will be accompanied by a group of American reporters and by leading civil rights activists, some of whom worry that he faces the fate of Benigno Aquino, a Philippines exile assassinated when he returned to that country in 1983.

Recently threats from official Korean sources have greeted every major pronouncement from Mr. Kim's supporters in the United States. Two months ago Byong Hion Lew, South Korea's ambassador, was quoted as saying Mr. Kim would have to serve the remaining 17½ years of a prison term if he returns home.

And two days ago Choi Chang Yoon, a senior adviser to South Korea's president, was quoted as

saying Mr. Kim would be jailed as a revolutionary upon his return. It was those remarks that drew the disavowal here yesterday.

An embassy aide called reporters to read the formal statement: "The embassy understands that they were his personal views and do not relate to the position of the Korean government in any manner."

In fact, U.S. officials said, the earlier threats also may have been personal extrapolations of more ambiguous government remarks. Until

Ambassador Byong talked about prison two months ago, a diplomat here said, government officials had talked only of dealing with Mr. Kim "according to the law."

That could have meant less severe treatment, the diplomat explained, ranging from house arrest to forced hospitalization to complete freedom based on the premise that Mr. Kim's fragile health did not permit imprisonment. Now, another official said, "it looks as if the government is trying to restore its options."

Mr. Kim's life as a dissident has been a series of narrow escapes. In 1973 he was kidnapped in Tokyo by agents of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency and smuggled back to Seoul. He credits Henry A. Kissinger, then secretary of State, with saving his life at that time.

Both the Carter and Reagan administrations have intervened on his behalf. It was Mr. Reagan's direct intervention, officials say, that caused President Chun to suspend Mr. Kim's prison sentence in 1982 and release him for medical treatment in the United States.

In recent months the Korean government has lifted sanctions from many opposition politicians and permitted growing dissent. But prohibitions remain in effect against several, including Mr. Kim.

However, with legislative elections coming soon, a U.S. diplomat said, and with President Chun expecting to visit Washington in about three months — the date has not been fixed — "leaning on Kim Dae Jung may not have seemed a very good idea."